

AMERICAN SOVEREIGNTY:

7

A SHORT SERMON,

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SERMON.

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.—ROMANS XIII, 1.

I do not intend, on this occasion, a long, formal, or elaborate discourse. But I desire, with the blessing of God, to state, clearly and impressively, certain elemental truths of our Holy Religion, important to be remembered always, but especially so in the current crisis of our affairs.

By the "higher powers," the text plainly alludes to political sovereignty and its authorized representatives. Political sovereignty is not of human origin. It is a divine institution.

In this country, we say much of State sovereignty and of United States sovereignty. But, strictly speaking, our sovereignty is the sovereignty of the people. The people of the United States existed before the States were united. The people of every State existed before the State itself. When, in the course of God's providence, the due time came, and, with it, the due natural and social conditions, He brought the people to these shores as dependent colonists. Again, in due time, by the revolution, He made them independent—a simple, elemental, popular, sovereign power. In this capacity, He committed to them two great trusts—the construction of the two great institutions, without which no community can perpetuate a prosperous existence; one civil, the other religious; one the State, the other the Church. In the execution of these trusts, there was no external human authority to control or direct them. So far as other men were concerned, on all the earth and under the whole heavens, they were absolutely free; were at liberty to do all they would and could. God virtually said to them: "Behold, my people! the continent is before you. I made it for you, and you for it. Here none shall molest or make you afraid. Build ye a State for yourselves. Build ye a Church for yourselves. Build ye a State and Church worthy your own dignity and destiny, worthy the imitation of the world, and worthy my progressive and redeeming dispensations."

But, while thus set free from human authority, were they left destitute of Divine guidance? Not at all. There was a visible representative of Divine sovereignty among them, commissioned and qualified to superintend and modify the performance of their appropriate work, and to which they humbly acknowledged their own sovereignty to be subordinate and subservient. I mean, of course, God's book—the Holy Bible. As the people existed before the Union, before the States, and even before the colonies, so the Bible existed before the people—thousands of years before them; the angel in the cloud, to all the tribes of their ancestry, in all their wanderings through the wilderness, from the earliest recorded ages of time.

What then? By the instrumentality of the Bible, God prompted them to come hither. When they came, they brought the Bible with them. It was their highest distinction, their richest treasure, and their purest joy. It was, to them, as it is to us, or ought to be to us, the highest law in all the world of the highest power over all worlds. Their two-fold obligation was, to found the State and found the Church, on the Bible; to make their State a Bible-State and their Church a Bible-Church. This was not because any human authority had any right or power to command them to do so; but simply because God himself, by His marvelous providence, so commanded them. No human authority would

even have attempted such intervention. All human authorities had more or less dishonored the Bible. It was held under the foot of the State, and under the thumb of the Church. Therefore God, with a high hand and an outstretched arm, had conducted His people from the Old World to the new. It was He who thus exalted the Bible in its new sphere, and from the beginning exacted obedience to its precepts. He made His people free on purpose that they might thus honor His book.

But what is the history, what are the facts? Did they build up a Bible-State? Did they build up a Bible-Church? Is the Bible supreme, this day, in both State and Church? If not, then I insist upon it, that the people have been, and yet are, unfaithful to their trusts. And, if unfaithful, then I further insist upon it that it is not too late to repent, not too late to reform; and that it is still their imperative duty to fulfil the task at first assigned them; to conform both State and Church to the doctrines and morals of the Bible.

If any thing be plain, this gradation of sovereignty is plain. The *first* sovereignty in our land is the sovereignty of the Bible—representing the sovereignty of God. The *second*, is the sovereignty of the people—representing the sovereignty of the Bible. The *third*, in view of superior numbers, though inferior interests, is the sovereignty of the State—representing the sovereignty of the people, in secular affairs. And the *fourth*, relating to smaller numbers but greater interests, is the sovereignty of the Church—representing the sovereignty of the people, in religious affairs. Below all these are the divisions and diversities of popular sovereignty, exhibited by particular States and Churches, and all minor voluntary social institutions.

It is greatly to be regretted that this gradation of sovereignty is not more generally understood, remembered, and practically acknowledged. There are men among us who deny, or doubt, or in some way habitually ignore the sovereignty of the Bible—as representative of God. In like manner, they deny, or doubt, or ignore, the sovereignty of the people—as representative of the Bible. And so, coming within the State sphere, as though there were no God, and were no Bible, they treat the sovereignty of the people, in secular affairs, as a natural right, a birth-right, a right to be exercised without responsibility except to the will of a majority of their own number as expressed by a legal vote, or the will of a minority, as enforced by revolutionary violence. Therefore, we so commonly hear it said, by zealous but ill-informed advocates of national sovereignty, that the Constitution of the United States is the supreme law of the land: as though this were an absolute and not a relative truth; as though it required no qualification; as though there were nothing beyond and above it; as though the national Constitution were the highest symbol of popular sovereignty; as though there were no other to compare with it; as though it had become unchangeable; as though it had got to be superior to the people themselves, and were wholly independent of the Bible, and the God of the Bible.

How strange all this is! What is the national Constitution? It is *one* of the people's institutions; *one* of their political institutions; and their *highest* political institution: so much, and no more. Hark! "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish *this* Constitution for the United States of America." That is, this is *one* thing, and politically the *chief* thing, that we the people choose to do, in exercise of our sovereignty: not presenting it as an unchangeable instrument, but providing for suitable amendments of it, and remembering that the same sovereignty which now ordains it will always remain superior to it, and hold it in entire control.

But, what are the relations of this Constitution? Here it is, especially, that the want of correct knowledge, or just appreciation of facts, already alluded to, becomes painfully evident. Hark again! "This *Constitution* and the *laws* of the United States, which shall be made in pursuance thereof; and all the *treaties* made, or which shall be made, under the authority of the United States, SHALL BE THE SUPREME LAW OF THE LAND." Here the zealous advocates of absolute constitutional supremacy are accustomed to stop. The Constitution is the supreme law! This sovereignty is the only sovereignty in the land! Christians, Jews, infidels, men of the world, we, in whole, are the people, and the national Constitution is our supreme law. Away with every other! Away with the heretics who assert any other! We intend to abide by this alone, and be governed by this alone. From all it prohibits, we will carefully refrain; but all it allows we will do at our pleasure; and none shall hinder us. To this extent, we are absolutely free. We confess no higher responsibility.

Now, what nonsense all this is, and how unspeakably deplorable it is. The sovereignty of the national Constitution is *not* absolute, but, *relative*. It is only a midway sovereignty. Above it, are other sovereignties to which it is subordinate; and below it are other sovereignties, which are subordinate to it. The sovereignty of the people themselves is above it, and the sovereignty of the Bible is above the people, and the sovereignty of God above the Bible. Why, the relations of this constitutional sovereignty are not left in doubt. They are plainly declared in the very section, a part of which I have just cited. And what are they? Does the article, after saying that this "shall be the supreme law of the land," proceed thus: "and the judges in every State shall be bound thereby,"—any thing in the sovereignty of the people, or of the Bible, or of God, "to the contrary notwithstanding?" Not a word like it. These are superior relations—relations beyond and above it, over which it has no control, but on which it is entirely dependent. The specified relations are, of course, inferior; and therefore, the article reads thus: "This Constitution, &c.—shall be the *supreme law* of the land; and the judges in every State shall be bound thereby, any thing in the *Constitution* or *laws* of any STATE to the contrary notwithstanding." The article is directed, not against popular sovereignty, or Bible sovereignty, or Divine sovereignty; but, against the monstrous error, the awful heresy, the bloody dogma, as it has turned out to be, of State sovereignty—either in opposition to, in secession from, or in rebellion against, the sovereignty of the Union.

That was the design of our fathers. They never dreamed of superseding the higher sovereignties by this merely political national sovereignty. When they had ordained and established the Constitution of the United States, they regarded and confessed themselves as completely subject to the Bible and the Bible's God as they were before. Had it not been for the Bible, the Constitution could never have been ordained and established. If it embody true principles of human rights, and sure promises of honorable perpetuity, its principles and promises are alike derived from the Bible. It has no value except as the Bible sanctions it. And if, in any respect, it is in conflict with the Bible it should be made to conform to it.

But now let us turn, for a little while, to the Church sphere—representing the sovereignty of the people in religious affairs. Here we are at once struck by a great difference between our State and church arrangements. We have even a greater number of separate denominations or churches than we have of individual States. But we have no general union of churches, no general ecclesiastical government, no common Christian constitution, not even "Articles of Confederation." Instead of a great national document, commencing—"We, the *Christians* of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish truth, insure tranquility, provide for common prosperity at home, promote the conver-

sion of the world abroad, and secure the blessings of our Holy Religion to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United Churches of America:” instead of anything like this, and an article providing for amendments of such constitution, and another declaring it to be, under God and the Bible, the supreme law of the Christians in the land, and that the office-bearers in every church shall be bound thereby, anything in the constitution or laws of any church to the contrary notwithstanding: instead of all this, or anything like it, we have a promiscuous assemblage of separate and diverse ecclesiastical sovereignties, not divided by state or other territorial lines, but intermingling their forces, interests, rivalries, and courtesies all over the continent. Historically the most of these, and especially the most powerful of them, are descendants of Old World colonists, with Old World creeds, rituals, ordinances, and usages. There has never been an AMERICAN ECCLESIASTICAL REORGANIZATION, to bring the churches into closer conformity with the Bible and greater unity and harmony among themselves. For want of this, in my humble judgment, there has been great loss of Christian influence.

But, without stopping to notice any supposed imperfections, I wish to remark here that the American Church, under God and the Bible, is an institution of popular sovereignty as much as the American State; that the great mass of its members are Evangelical Christians; that they are the main dependence of the nation for all the elements of moral and intellectual, if not, also, even physical power; and that they deserve to be better represented, and ought to be better represented, and must be better represented, and when they become fully awake to their powers and privileges and learn how to exercise and improve them most efficiently, will be better represented in the administration of State affairs—which are their own affairs just as much as church affairs are their own. Pre-eminently they are the people. The concentration of sovereignty is within their circle. They hold it in their hands, almost without knowing it, certainly without rightly using it.

The theme is far, far too large and important for such an occasion as this. I merely teach, as already intimated, a brief primary lesson.

For instance, what is the Christian doctrine of war? May the Church declare war, and prosecute war? Not at all. May it even encourage war? I doubt this—as a direct measure. The Church is a peace institution. It should preach peace, and in every way promote and encourage peace. The Church, so to speak, is not the people’s proper war organ. It was designed for redeeming, and not destructive purposes. But, they have a proper war organ. It is the State. As citizens, they are joint possessors of State power, and responsible for the exercise of it. The State may declare war, and prosecute war. But what is its justification? May it commence and carry on war at its own pleasure? Not at all. It is the most solemn performance of a sacred ministerial office; and must be fulfilled in the name and with the sanction of God. The context illustrates the whole subject. Let me read the text again, in its connection with subsequent verses:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers: for there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power RESISTETH THE ORDINANCE OF GOD: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation, [or condemnation.] For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is THE MINISTER OF GOD to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid, for he BEARETH NOT THE SWORD IN VAIN: for he is THE MINISTER OF GOD, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for WRATH, but also for CONSCIENCE SAKE. For, for this cause ye pay tribute also: for they ARE GOD’S MINISTERS, attending continually upon this very thing. Render, therefore, to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor. Owe no man any thing, but to love one another, for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.

In ordinary cases—cases concerning a single criminal, or a few criminals only, war is not necessary. Punishment of evil is easily accomplished, under such circumstances, by ordinary methods. But, in extraordinary cases—cases of ex-

tended treason and all-threatening rebellion—war, in some form, becomes a necessity. Yet, the nature of the act remains the same. It is an official duty. It is a ministerial punishment of evil doers. There is no pleasure in it on the part of the magistrate, any more than there is on the part of God—that is, if the magistrate act in the true spirit of his office. It is an awful, but imperative obligation; and derives all its propriety and dignity from this fact. The more blood on the sword the more tears also; and happy is the day when its blade may be restored to its brightness and returned to its sheath.

What then? If war is to be thus justified by Christianity itself, as, for the time being, an indispensable State power and office, how shall it be conducted? Who shall be chiefly represented in its management? The worst part of our population? wicked men? ignorant men? wild, rash, and cruel men? men who take pleasure in rapine and violence? men who fight for the love of fighting, and care not what amount of distress they create? men who laugh at the Bible, and scoff at God? Are they to be chiefly remembered and respected by our authorities, and allowed to fill our camps with profanity, Sabbath-breaking, intemperance, and all manner of iniquity? Surely these are not the people. They are the rabble. The great masses of Evangelical Christians, and all who sympathise with them in reverence of divine institutions, *they* are the people, the strength, and beauty, and glory of the nation. *They* are to be chiefly represented in the management of war, as in all other connections; the best part of our population; good men; intelligent men; prudent men; just men; benevolent men; men who deplore the necessity of war; men who believe the Bible and adore and worship God. They are to be remembered and respected, and such a discipline established and enforced in the council, in the camp, and in the field, as they can approve and sustain; such a discipline as will preserve in the army the highest moral tone, the majestic sense of law, and the solemn and immovable might of a good conscience.

There is no Sabbath in war! Who says so? Has God ever said so? Does the Bible say so? Do the people say so? Does the church, or even the State, duly representing the people, say so? Or, is it an unauthorized assumption—an arbitrary and infidel desecration? The Jews regarded the law of the Sabbath as prohibiting war. In their later ages, indeed, they so constructed it as to admit the propriety of a *defensive* battle. And, so far as I have noticed, they always made their defense good. But an *onset* was not allowable on the Sabbath. Neither, in my judgment, does Christianity allow it. Nor can I hope for success under such circumstances.

Our late battle was a Sabbath battle. It is said to have been specially ordered so; to provide a spectacle for civilians who could most conveniently attend on that day! Can this be true? If so, who can wonder at the result?

Some forty regiments were there. Were there forty chaplains, also, representing the Christian ministry of the country? And were there hundreds or thousands of soldiers also, representing the membership of the churches of the country? Why, then, was not the Christian sentiment of the country remembered and respected? Was that *onset* a work of *necessity*? Not at all. Was it the work of *mercy*? Not at all. Rather, it was a work of *cruelty*. The necessity was for *rest*—for *sleep*—for *food*—for *religious instruction* and *worship*. Had the Sabbath been observed, as it ought to have been, in all probability—that is, so far as we can see and judge—the result would have been different. As it was, there was no defeat, properly speaking. Never was greater bravery exhibited, in the history of the world. And victory was almost assured. But, then, for wise purposes doubtless, the *innocent were allowed to suffer for the guilty*. Then came the *punitive panic*—the *judicial disappointment*. And the civilians, for whom it is said the battle was ordered, became the instruments of overthrow. The “NATIONAL INTELLIGENCER”—perhaps the most trust-worthy of all jour-

nals, in an editorial headed—"THE TRUTH OF HISTORY ;" issued on last Friday—distinctly declares—"The *panic begun* with some *amateur warriors*, was *communicated* to the *teamsters*, and affected only a *portion* of the troops, who had been wearied by a *ten hours' struggle* without *food or refreshment* of any kind. The great body of the army maintained good order."

Well would it have been for these civilians, and for their country also, if, instead of attending this Sabbath battle, they had been quietly assembled, in the sanctuaries of the city, adoring and worshipping God, in the beauty of holiness. And well would it have been for our army, as for our country also, if that Sabbath had been kept as a holy day, throughout all the encampments : if the bodies of the soldiers had been refreshed by food and rest, and their spirits refreshed by hymns and prayers, and the thousand conscience-cheerers of the word of God.

If there were no commandment to remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy, the very beauty of it, and blessedness of it, should make it regarded as the most charming of all human inventions or institutions. And surely, if six days out of seven be enough for working, six days out of seven are enough for fighting. I would that we might hope, that, *henceforth, there shall be no more Sabbath fighting* : at any rate, *no setting of the battle*, on our part, on this hallowed day.

[The sermon closed with some extempore remarks on the importance of attending, in the midst of all this uncontrollable strife, to the great work of *personal salvation*.]